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of Nebuchadnezzar to the point where they are incorporated into the finished book in the second century BCE.[33] If Daniel 1 is indeed intended as an introduction to a complex of stories already operating with a long-embedded oral tradition, then maybe there are historical possibilities that make it imaginable that the gathered audience for these particular texts would indeed have included children in a way that might not be so easily extended to the rest of the book. Families and groups would huddle together and tell their stories which subverted the empire. The children would laugh out loud as the furnace got hotter and hotter. The adults would draw their theo-political conclusions, delighting also that the children were loving it.

I have no stake in claiming that this must have been so, or that it is a better account than any of the other ways in which these tales circulated with a view to offering a vision of 'a lifestyle for diaspora', as Humphrey's justly celebrated article once put it.[34] But it does at least seem possible that one of the reasons why a children's reading of Daniel (chaps. 1–7) works so well to generate interpretative insights and possibilities is that it is not so very far away from tapping into a dimension of the text which is there by design as much as by readerly ingenuity. The names of that design may not, in historical terms, have included 'children's literature', for obvious reasons, but recent studies are certainly suggesting labels that bring the book into some sort of relationship with what we count as children's literature today. David Valeta argues compellingly that the tales of Daniel 1–6 are best understood as 'prenovelistic Menippean satires' which use humour to resist oppression, in a study which compares their striking literary functions with stories such as *The Wizard of Oz*.[35] His characterization of Daniel 1–6 sees these chapters as 'thoroughly satirical... funny, fantastical and free... wild, witty and wise'.[36] It may be that Valeta's study, tied to a view of children of all (reading) ages enjoying the satirical tour-de-force, offers one of the best frameworks yet for affirming the historical plausibility that children might have been expected to enjoy the book.

The book of Daniel may with profit be read as children's literature. How many other biblical texts, one wonders, might be seen in persuasively new ways if those in command of the critical data of the text could also learn to see things as little children, or failing that, at least as Children's Literature theorists?[37]

33. See Wesselius, 'The Writing of Daniel', again; or E.C. Lucas, 'Daniel: Resolving the Enigma', *VT* 50 (2000), pp. 66-80.

34. W. Lee Humphreys, 'A Life-Style for Diaspora: A Study of the Tales of Esther and Daniel', *JBL* 92 (1973), pp. 211-23.

35. Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions*, pp. 1-38. On the *Wizard of Oz*, see pp. 3-6.

36. Valeta, *Lions and Ovens and Visions*, p. 193.

37. I am grateful for lively discussion of an earlier version of this paper delivered at the Society of Old Testament Studies Winter Meeting in Durham, January 2011.

Ruth: Images of an Unfulfillable Longing

Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher

Abstract

The story of Ruth has been an inspiration for poets throughout the centuries, the biblical portrait of her being transformed from varying perspectives. This article focusses on twentieth-century German lyric poetry and traces the different attitudes the poems take to Ruth. From Else Lasker-Schüler, Gottfried Benn and Bertolt Brecht, Rose Ausländer, Paul Celan and Nelly Sachs to Christine Busta and Eva Zeller, to well as to younger writers like Matthias Hermann, poets attend to this biblical character. Focussing particularly on Ruth's longing for a new life and a place where she belongs, the poems reflect changing social and political situations in the twentieth century through the eyes of Ruth. The promises of the biblical story and contemporary desires meet. Contrary to the biblical text, however, modern poetry stays with Ruth's longing and does not portray its fulfilment. It is the ambition and the vision in the story of Ruth that appear to be most appealing to modern poets.

The story of Ruth, the Moabite woman who left her country and people to follow her mother-in-law and become part of Israel, has been reproduced and used by poets as a discursive object throughout the centuries.[1] If we focus on German literature of the 20th century the reconstruction of Ruth appears almost exclusively as lyric poetry.[2] When Ruth's perspective,

1. Timothy Beal, 'Reception History and Beyond: Toward the Cultural History of Scriptures', *Biblical Interpretation* 19 (2011), pp. 357-72 (358). In her article 'Is This Naomi?', Cheryl Exum shows the various ways exegesis, fine art, literature and film fill the gaps of the story with their interpretations (J. Cheryl Exum, 'Is This Naomi?', in her *Plotted, Shot, and Painted: Cultural Representations of Biblical Women* [JSOTSup, 215; Gender, Culture, Theory, 3; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996], pp. 127-74).

2. Cf. Magda Motté, '"Daß ihre Zeichen bleiben." Frauen des Alten Testaments', in *Die Bibel in der deutschsprachigen Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts. II. Personen und Figuren* (ed. Heinrich Schmidinger; Mainz: Matthias-Grünewald-Verlag, 1999), pp. 205-58 (241).

her experiences and her attitude are reconstructed in different contexts they reveal a fragmented and fragile vision matching the lyric diction. The clearly drawn plot of the biblical story with its fine arc of suspense and its happy end, however, is widely ignored or else left to the imagination of the readers. Apart from idyllic or heroic imaginations of the solidarity between Ruth and Naomi, or from a common love story between Ruth and Boaz, lyric poetry focuses on its more worrying and precarious aspects, especially the affection between the characters; but also the solidarity of Ruth is called into question and remains ambiguous. Ruth's perspective, her longing for a home and (a new) life is widely explored and imagined. In this way the story of Ruth serves as a mirror for lyrical images that construct and deconstruct the possibilities of love, solidarity and life itself throughout the 20th century. However, only fragments of her story come into focus, highlighting particular contexts and aspects, but a conclusion is not imagined. It is Ruth's longing, but not its fulfilment, that appeals to the poets.

Ruth's Longing

The biblical book characterizes Ruth by her longing, her loyalty and her initiative ways to overcome seemingly indelible problems. From the beginning Ruth is characterized by her loyalty to her mother-in-law (1.16-17). Ruth is willing to leave everything—her land, her mother, her people—in order to follow Naomi. She does so without encouragement (cf. Rebekah) or divine support (cf. Abraham) and, furthermore, she follows her mother-in-law into an uncertain future. This behaviour is neither explained nor motivated. However, her longing to become a part of Naomi's people is unfolded throughout the story. Especially in Ruth's dialogues with Boaz her perspective and her hopes are conveyed. In the scene in the field Ruth points out that she feels comforted (*nḥm*) by Boaz's reaction to her, because he ignored her status as a foreigner (2.10). Furthermore, she introduces the concept of 'favour' (*ḥn*) (2.2, 10). In a positive way Ruth thus alludes to her still unfulfilled hopes. It becomes obvious that she is hoping for more than an anonymous right to glean. In the scene at the threshing floor Ruth's longing becomes obvious once more. However, Ruth does not offer herself to Boaz as an alluring Moabite woman,[3] in the way her mother-in-law suggested, but

3. Naomi's plan carries allusions to Gen. 19.31-37 where the firstborn daughter of Lot, the mother of Moab, lies with her (drunken) father. Thus Ruth has to repeat what her ancestress did. Cf. Jürgen Ebach, 'Fremde in Moab—Fremde aus Moab: das Buch Ruth als politische Literatur', in *Bibel und Literatur* (ed. Jürgen Ebach and Richard Faber; München: Fink, 1995), pp. 277-304 (281). Cf. also Num. 25.1-2 were women of Moab seduce Israelites and invite them to worship other deities.

she appeals to Boaz's solidarity and challenges him as redeemer. Thus Ruth does not prove herself as a seductive strange woman;[4] instead she claims to be a woman of the family and in doing so anticipates the fulfilment of her longing. Once again Ruth requests more from Boaz than material support. She asks him rather to act according to his blessing (2.12); however, it is not Yhwh but Boaz who should spread his wings over her.[5] Rather, Ruth interprets the situation in the light of her earlier encounter with Boaz and she suggests to Boaz how he should (re)act (3.4). Although Ruth acts within the social boundaries of her new home she, nevertheless, acts independently and autonomously.[6] She varies her mother-in-law's advice and she persuades to Boaz support her in order to reach her goal. At the end of the story Ruth's hopes have been fulfilled. The reactions of the elders at the gate (4.11-12) and of the women of the town (4.15), as well as the genealogy (4.17-22), further emphasize that Ruth has made her way into the midst of Israel.[7]

Longing for a Home, Longing for Love

Ruth's longing for a home, a sense of belonging and of affection is addressed repeatedly. Especially her devotion to Boaz, which falls short of a love story in the biblical text, is emotionally enhanced in several poems.

In 'Abendlieder der Ruth', two short poems by Nelly Sachs,[8] Ruth's longing for a home surpasses her longing for her lover. The first poem begins with references to a harvest and the reapers but it is shown in retrospect. The day's work is long over and the evening is 'flowing out of the broken jug'.[9] Despite the overtone of transience the images of nature evoke an atmosphere of peace and quiet in the second stanza. Ruth, the lyrical speaker, does not appear prior to the end of the first poem:

4. Cf. Prov. 2.11-19; 5.1-20; 6.24-35, 7.4-27.

5. Ebach, 'Fremde in Moab', pp. 295-96.

6. Cf. Lau, Peter H.W., *Identity and Ethics in the Book of Ruth: A Social Identity Approach* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, 416; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), pp. 102-105.

7. The comparison with Rachel, Leah (4.12) and Tamar (4.18) refers to active, creative and self-determined women. Like them, but also like the daughters of Loth, Ruth claims her right to have descendants. Cf. Ebach, 'Fremde in Moab', p. 298.

8. The poems were first published in *Der Morgen*, 12/12 (Berlin, 1937). The text is quoted from Ruth Dinesen (ed.), *'Und Leben hat immer wie Abschied geschmeckt': Frühe Gedichte und Prosa der Nelly Sachs* (Stuttgarter Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 178; Stuttgart: Akademischer Verlag Heinz, 1987), p. 255.

9. The 'broken jug' is used as a symbol for the passing of time. Cf. Birgit Hartberger, *Das biblische Ruth-Motiv in deutschen lyrischen Gedichten des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Münsteraner theologische Abhandlungen, 17; Altenberge: Oros-Verlag, 1992), p. 251.

und mein Herz ist eine Opferspeise:
Gott, teil sie der Liebe gnädig zu.

[And my heart is a sacrificial dish:
God, feed it to love gracefully.][10]

She integrates herself into the atmospheric picture but she moves into a divine sphere when she calls her heart a sacrificial dish ('Opferspeise') and asks God to allocate it to love.

The second poem continues the first, chronologically speaking; evening turns into night. The references to the harvest (Ruth 2) are followed in the second poem by a reference to the scene at the threshing floor at night (Ruth 3):

Sterne fliegen wie die Vögel nieder,
kniee ich so still zu Boaz' Füßen,
und verhüllen mit dem Lichtgefieder
unsre Herzen, sie mit Gott zu süßen.

[Stars sail down like birds,
I kneel so still at Boaz's feet,
and veil with their feathering of light
our hearts, to sweeten them with God.]

The motif of tranquillity is continued, and the image of the heart reappears, allowing an allusion to the sacrificial dish and linking it to a divine sphere. The second stanza reveals the central motive of the poem: Ruth's longing for a home. In the form of a question she tries to identify the portrayed situation with 'Heimat':

Hab ich in die Heimat hingefunden,
die, ein rauschend Mantel, mich umfließt?
Selig Wort, das tiefer weint als Wunden
und die Pforte wie ein Tempel schließt.

[Have I found the homeland,
which flows around me, a sweeping cloak?
Blessed word that cries deeper than wounds
and closes the gate like a temple.]

Just like love, the image of a home is an ambivalent concept, it is a yearning that is consuming. The metaphorical description used for 'Heimat' is another reference to the biblical book. With the allusion of Boaz's cloak (3.9) the vision of a resting place for Ruth is provoked. 'Heimat' is a blessed word, but nevertheless it unveils a most painful memory. Blessing, pain and home are inextricably linked. Home is also like a temple, enclosing those

10. The translation of the poems offers a reading aid to the German texts, but they make no claim to being a poetical translation. If not indicated otherwise the poems are translated by Barbara Bucher.

entering it and consuming them like a sacrifice.[11] The evening songs of Ruth depict a longing that despite arcadian images is far from an idyllic place. Ruth's longing is aware of the sacrifice and the pain and knows that the fulfilment of her desire will consume her.

At the beginning of the 20th century Else Lasker-Schüler and Gottfried Benn use images of Ruth and Boaz to construct a vision of love.

Like the woman of the Song of Songs the lyric speaker in the poem entitled 'Ruth' (1905) by Else Lasker-Schüler[12] desires her lover. The identity of this lover, however, is not revealed. The lyrical speaker is aware of her lover's longing and knows that he (or she) is searching for her. This emotionally charged atmosphere is captured but not dissolved. When the last stanza leaves the immediate situation and reflects on the love of the lyric speaker the image of home is added as another dimension of the world of the lyrical subject:[13]

Am Brunnen meiner Heimat steht ein Engel,
Der singt das Lied meiner Liebe,
Der singt das Lied Ruths.

[At the well of my native land
Waits an angel,
Who sings the song of my love,
Who sings the song of Ruth.][14]

With the figure of an angel Lasker-Schüler refers to a true home, an imaginative place where her love is known as a song, a song of Ruth. The well that is mentioned is not a meeting spot but a place of memories. Only in this space of memories is the speaker identified as Ruth. When the song of her love corresponds to the song of Ruth a double connotation of her longing unfolds. It is not only her lover but her 'true home' the lyrical speaker longs for in her memories.

11. In the light of the growing threat from the National-Socialist regime the image of the 'Heimat' becomes extremely fragile from a Jewish perspective. Like many other culturally assimilated Jews Nelly Sachs rediscovered her Jewishness as her spiritual home because of the repressions of the regime. First published in 1937, the poem reflects this situation just prior to the onset of the persecutions.

12. The poem was first published in 1905 in the collection of poems *Der siebente Tag*. Cf. Lothar Bluhm, '"Ruth sucht überall." Else Lasker-Schülers mnemosynetisches Gedicht', in *Interpretationen: Gedichte von Else Lasker-Schüler* (ed. Birgit Lermen and Magda Motte; Stuttgart: Reclam, 2010, pp. 19-26 (42). The poem is quoted from Else Lasker-Schüler, *Die Gedichte 1902–1943* (Gesammelte Werke, 1/1; Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1997), p. 90.

13. With the combination of 'well' and 'angel' the story of Hagar (Gen. 16) is alluded to. With the image of an angel promising a great future the desire of Ruth is further emphasized. Cf. Bluhm, '"Ruth sucht überall"', p. 47.

14. Translation by Exum, 'Is This Naomi?', p. 160.

Several years later Lasker-Schüler again turns to motifs from the book of Ruth. Her poem entitled 'Boaz' (1912)[15] is a love song describing the coming together of Ruth and Boaz. Set in an imaginary harvest, Ruth is searching for more than ears of grain.

> Ruth sucht überall
> Nach goldenen Kornblumen
> An den Hütten der Brothüter vorbei –
>
> [Ruth seeks everywhere
> For golden cornflowers
> Beyond the huts of the guardians of bread –][16]

She is looking for golden cornflowers, an action that brings a storm of sweat and a glittering play over Boaz's heart. When the last stanza metaphorically describes the heart of Boaz waving like corn stalks towards Ruth, the poem ends with a rising emotional expectation. The tension of longing and the growing desire contrasts with hints that this might not be fulfilled. Ruth is looking for more than Boaz and the cornfield might have to offer her.[17]

While both poems by Else Lasker-Schüler only describe Boaz, Gottfried Benn presents a male perspective in the poem 'Drohungen' (1913).[18] From a male point of view, the lyrical speaker contrasts his own desire with the longing of his lover.[19] First the male lyrical speaker describes his love as being like the love of animals, lustful, wild and without obligation. This corresponds with the image of his lover, who is detached, cool and passionate at the same time. However, when the description again picks up an image of an animal, a leech, the comparison reveals a reproach and urges the lyrical subject to leave:

> Du machst mir Liebe: blutegelhaft
> Ich will von dir.
>
> [You make love to me: leech like:
> I want (to get) away from you.]

15. The poem 'Boaz' was first published in the journal *Der Sturm* in May 1912. Cf. Bluhm, '"Ruth sucht überall"', p. 19. The text is quoted from Lasker-Schüler, *Gedichte*, p. 142.

16. Translation by Exum, 'Is This Naomi?', p. 159.

17. The poem also bears witness to the understanding of art at its time. Compared to everyday life the poem creates an alternative world. It oversteps the strict categories of a conservative-bourgeois society and longs for a modern, spiritual and cultural renewal. Cf. Bluhm, 'Ruth sucht überall', p. 25.

18. Benn, *Gedichte*, pp. 49-50.

19. If this poem is read as a response to Lasker-Schüler's poems it might bear traces of the difficult relationship between Gottfried Benn and Else Lasker-Schüler.

When the following stanza identifies the lover as Ruth, a sharp distinction between the descriptions of the lovers becomes obvious. While the male speaker remains in the sphere of animal metaphors the female lover becomes a figure of history; she becomes Ruth. In this way the distance between the two increases. Ruth is looking out for more than 'Affen-Adam', as the lyrical speaker describes himself, she longs for Boaz.[20] The strong bond Ruth hopes to establish is the starting point for this identification. The strength of the biblical figure, however, is turned into a threat. The following description explains this notion with more explicit biblical references:

> Du bist Ruth. Du hast Ähren an deinem Hut.
> Dein Nacken ist braun von Makkabäerblut.
> Deine Stirn ist fliehend: Du sahst so lange
> über die Mandeln[21] nach Boaz aus.
>
> [Your are Ruth. You have ears on your hat.
> Your neck is brown from Maccabees' blood.
> Your forehead is fleeting: you looked so long
> For Boaz beyond the almond (trees).]

The lover's description refers to the corn as an attribute of Ruth, but also to the Maccabees. This allusion points to Ruth as the ancestress of the Maccabees, it identifies her with a revolutionary element in Israel; she is part of those who stand up for Israel, those who are determined. The poetic vision that the inner characteristics of Ruth shape her bodily appearance is continued. A sloping forehead bears witness to her efforts at seeking for Boaz. Again the aspect of persistence is emphasized. With the reference to Ruth the poem indicates the intensity of the female longing, it even acknowledges it as heroic; nevertheless, the insistence of his lover's love threatens the male desire. On the one hand the male speaker clearly denies this claim, on the other he also recognizes that Ruth is seeking for someone else and he distances himself from Boaz. Thus the mutual longing of the lovers still remains unsatisfied.

Deconstructing Love and Loyalty

The presentation of love and loyalty in Bertolt Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* repeatedly refers to Ruth's oath of loyalty (1.16) with a disenchanting,

20. Cf. Hahn, 'Rahel. Esther. Ruth', pp. 289-93.

21. The unexpected occurrence of 'Mandeln' (almonds) could be read as a reference to a poem by Lasker-Schüler called 'Dem Barbaren'. In this poem the lyrical speaker describes her lover's body: 'Auf deines Leibes Steppe / Pflanze ich Cedern und Mandelbäume'. If this poem by Lasker-Schüler is read as the beginning of her relationship with Benn, then Ruth in Benn's poem is searching for Boaz over her lover's body, planted with almond trees. Cf. Hahn, 'Rahel. Esther. Ruth', pp. 291-92.

ironic twist. First, Polly's parents use the quotation with an ironic twist when they envision Polly's and Macheath's love as a temporary romantic, lovelorn passion bound for disillusion and failure:

> Herr und Frau Peachum:
> Wo ist dann ihr Mond über Soho?
> Wo bleibt dann ihr verdammter 'Fühlst-du-mein-Herz-Schlagen'-Text
> Wo ist dann das 'Wenn du wohn gehst, geh auch ich wohin, Johnny!'[22]
>
> [Mr and Mrs Peachum:
> So where is their moon over Soho?
> What's left of their confounded 'Can you feel my heart beating' spell?
> Where now is their 'Whither thou goest, I will go with thee, Johnny!'
> For the old moon's waning and you're shot to hell!][23]

Later also Polly and Macheath quote Ruth 1.16 to describe their love, adding some superficial romantic mood to an otherwise improvised and coarse wedding.[24]

> Polly: Wo du hingehst, da will auch ich hingehen.
> Macheath: Und wo du bleibst, da will auch ich sein.[25]
>
> [Polly: Whither thou goest, I will go with thee.
> Macheath: And where thou stayest, there too shall I stay.][26]

The quotation aims to emphasize an emotional unity but it fails due to the contrasting situation and the previous mockery of Polly's parents.[27]

Ruth 1.16 is also alluded to when Polly tells her parents about the friendship between Macheath and Tiger Brown, the chief of police. To portray them, Polly quotes a part of their conversation confirming their closeness and their solidarity:

> Polly: Sooft sie einen Cocktail zusammen tranken, streichelten sie einander die Wangen und sagten: 'Wenn du noch einen kippst, dann will ich auch noch einen kippen.' Und sooft einer hinausging, wurden dem anderen die Augen feucht, und er sagte: 'Wenn du wohin gehst, will ich auch wohin gehen.'[28]
>
> [Polly: Whenever they had a cocktail together, they'd stroke each other's cheek and say, 'If you'll have another, I'll have another'. And whenever one went out, the other's eyes grew moist and he'd say, 'Whither thou goest, I will go too'.][29]

22. Brecht, 'Der Anstatt-Dass-Song', *Die Dreigroschenoper*, p. 171 (Act 1, Scene 1).

23. Brecht, 'The I-for-One Song', Bertolt Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera* (trans. Eric Bentley and Desmond Vesey; New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 13 (Act 1, Scene 1).

24. This usage corresponds to the widespread practice of quoting Ruth's oath of solidarity (1.16) in wedding ceremonies.

25. Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, p. 178 (Act 1, Scene 2).

26. Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera* (trans. Bentley and Vesey), p. 31 (Act 1, Scene 2).

27. 'Trotz aller vorhandenen Subtilität hat das biblische Treueversprechen, wenn es im Pferdestall zwischen Polly und Macheath korrekt zitiert wird, keine Chance auf Authentizität. Er bleibt schale Poesie oder Tünche, die über das Verbrechen und die Gnadenlosigkeit der Welt geschmiert wird' (Merle Clasen, *'Wie hast du's mit der Religion?' Studien zu Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill und ihrer Dreigroschenoper* (Dissertation, Kassel, 2005; http://nbn-resolving.de/urn.nbn.de.hebis.34-2008030720662 [30.3.2012]).), p. 222.

The repeated usage of the words of commitment and the ironic twist deconstruct the seriousness the reference to the biblical text recalls. Either the declared solidarity is a fleeing passion that barely masks the egoism of those who declare their solidarity, or the praised friendship is a dubious relationship between a criminal and the chief of police. Ruth's words become an idiomatic expression that alludes to a great commitment but simultaneously is unveiled as a caricature. Great emotions and merits are reduced to romantic or matey illusions that cannot sustain any challenge.

Nevertheless, when the existential longing of Ruth and the pretentious declarations of love and solidarity of Brecht's characters overlap, this contrast points out what is lacking. Although Brecht's songs and dialogues deconstruct the image of true love and even the references to Ruth are presented as lovelorn words, they emphasize the severity of what is lost. The memory of the biblical text (critically) enhances the phoney and selfish image of the characters. Thus is not the biblical world or its ideals that are dissolved. Rather the reality, as it is presented in Brecht's drama, is deconstructed by the biblical references.

Loyalty Reconsidered

Matthias Hermann chooses Ruth's point of view to offer another critical reflection on true motives. His poem entitled 'Ruth'[30] focuses on Ruth's longing for Israel, revealing her perspective as a remorseful retrospective on her apparent success. When Ruth confesses the lack of a motive beyond immediate needs, this reflection points to a perspective well aware of the consequences of this deficiency. Three stanzas, addressing Israel, Boaz and Saul, present different aspects formulated as pleas for forgiveness:

> Israel, vergib mir!
> Nicht mein Herz,
> Der Hunger trieb
> Mich in dein Honigreich.

28. Bertold Brecht, *Die Dreigroschenoper*, in *Die Stücke von Bertolt Brecht* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1978), pp. 165-202 (180) (Act 1, Scene 3).

29. Brecht, *The Threepenny Opera* (trans. Bentley and Vesey), p. 38 (Act 1, Scene 3).

30. Matthias Hermann, *72 Buchstaben. Gedichte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1989), p. 43.

[Israel, forgive me!
It was not my heart
But hunger drove
Me to your honeyed realm.]

The motive 'hunger' takes up the first scene of the biblical book but transfers the hunger from the family of Elimelech to Ruth. No longer are Israelites driven to the fertile fields of Moab, but a Moabite to the honey-land of Israel. In the poem only hunger is the reason for Ruth's longing for Israel; when she asks Israel for forgiveness this motivation signifies inadequacy. While the idea of the 'land of milk and honey' was good enough to encourage the Israelites, Ruth presents it as a flaw. As a Moabite woman, the biblical story demands a stronger motivation from Ruth, binding her to Israel, its worldview and social boundaries.

The second stanza continues this motif and transfers it to Ruth's relation with Boaz:

Boaz, vergib mir!
Nicht dein Traubenzweig,
Das Ährenfeld labte mich.

[Boaz, forgive me!
It was not your grape twig
But the fields of ears refreshed me.]

Ruth is not revived by Boaz's grapes but by the field of corn. Again the motive of hunger dominates. It is not Boaz's care (2.14), nor is it the longing for the promised land (cf. Num. 13.23) or the allusions to love (cf. Song 1.14) but hunger that motivates Ruth to turn towards Boaz. The following last stanza changes the topic and refers to the end of the biblical story, the genealogy.

Saul, vergib mir!
Meinem Schoß entsprossen
Herzlose Honighungrige.
Israel, vergib mir diese Könige.

[Saul, forgive me!
From my womb sprouted
Heartless hungry for honey.
Israel, forgive me these kings.]

Surprisingly, Ruth addresses Saul in the third stanza and asks his forgiveness for her descendants. She feels guilty for passing on her own hunger for Israel's honey to her progeny. With this last stanza Ruth explicitly identifies herself as the ancestress of the Davidic kings. Yet she is not proud but remorseful.

The poem presents a perspective on Ruth that is in contradiction to the biblical story.[31] She does not share Israel's dream and convictions but is driven by a hunger that finally destroys one possible future of Israel, namely a dynasty of Saul. Thus the poem confirms the fears of Moabite women who destroy Israel and impose their own world-view on them. The genealogy that points to a successful and great future in the biblical story (4.17-22) is read against the grain and the negative aspects of the Davidic kings are indicated. Matthias Hermann deconstructs the story of Ruth from its end. The power of the Davidic kings and a critical view on their reign is the starting point for the *relecture*. The argumentation contradicts the biblical image of Ruth the Moabite who became a true Israelite woman. The Ruth of the poem remains the other who selfishly established herself in the midst of Israel. In this way it is Ruth who confirms Israel's fears. Nevertheless, the critique does not only focus on Ruth, but also on David and the Davidic kings. In contrast to the common image of a glorified Davidic dynasty this poem offers another perspective as a late and remorseful insight of Ruth. Ruth is not convicted but her insight convicts the Davidic kings.[32]

Memory against Despair

Because the biblical text portrays Ruth as a woman who barely survived, she can become a figure of hope. Nonetheless, the poems express such a hope quite cautiously as a faint possibility.

From the perspective of an Austrian post-war society Christine Busta refers to the book of Ruth in her poem 'Wo keine Ähren mehr liegen' (1955). In this poem she only mentions Ruth and focuses rather on Ruth's sister, a figure she introduces as the lyrical speaker of the poem. Busta's image of this sister rejects the common interpretation of Ruth as an idyllic story. The world of the biblical story is vividly reconstructed for a contemporary audience, denying any hint of an idyll or the illusion that the life-threatening problems have already been solved, as contemporary interpretations of the

31. Georg Langenhorst points out that such an actualization in the form of reading against the grain is typical for Hermann's lyric ('"... Das Lenkrad ungleicher Erinnerung." Matthias Hermann, ein jüdischer Lyriker im Deutschland unserer Zeit', *Orientierung* 70 (2006), pp. 139-41 [141]).

32. The last stanza also refers to Goethe's appraisal of the book of Ruth but contradicts his estimation: '... gedenken wir des Buches Ruth, welches bei seinem hohen Zweck, einem Könige von Israel anständige, interessante Voreltern zu verschaffen ...' (Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Noten und Abhandlungen. Zu Besserem Verständnis des West-östlichen Divans* [ed. Michael Knaupp; Stuttgart: Reclam, 1999], p. 266).

book of Ruth suggested.[33] Setting Ruth aside, she depicts the fate of her sister, who finds nothing left on the fields but some straw.[34]

> Ruth war die reichere Schwester. Sie ging noch bei Tag.
> Ich gehe nur bei Nacht. Der Acker der Herzen ist längst schon
> abgeerntet, die karge Garbe der Armut gelesen.
> Nichts bring ich heim als ein Bündel staubiges Stroh.
>
> [Ruth was the fortunate sister. She still walked by day.
> I only walk by night. The acre of hearts has long been
> harvested, the meagre sheaf of poverty has been picked.
> I bring nothing to my home but a bundle of dusty straw.]

The desperate attempt to go on and to hope against all prospects, comes close to the situation reported in the biblical story.

> Im Winter wird es mich wärmen. Die Liebe lebt nicht nur vom Brote,
> sie lebt auch vom letzten Goldglanz
> eines Halms auf dem Herde, ehe die Asche erkaltet.
>
> [In the winter it will keep me warm. Love does not live on bread alone,
> it also lives from the last golden shimmer
> of a stalk on the stove ere the ashes cool.]

The poem ends, however, without much hope; it is only a faint memory of better days, the days of Ruth, that remains.

From a Jewish perspective, Paul Celan, Nelly Sachs and Rose Ausländer also remember Ruth after the Shoa and the Second World War. Unlike Christine Busta, they focus on Ruth as a figure of continuity and hope.

'In Ägypten', a poem by Paul Celan, is phrased as a sequence of nine requests beginning with: 'Du sollst/you shall...' These instructions focus on the relationship between a lyrical speaker and a woman stranger, offering directions for their love.[35] The woman stranger and Ruth are not identified in the poem.[36] Ruth rather belongs to the sphere of memories the lyrical speaker tries to recall in the eyes of a strange woman. In this way the stranger opens the possibility of continuing a history that otherwise has been lost.

33. Christine Busta frequently uses biblical images to criticize social deficiencies. She reads biblical stories against established interpretations and in this way reveals their disturbing aspects. Cf. Wolfgang Wiesmüller, 'Das Gedicht als Predigt', *Sprachkunst* 20 (1989), pp. 199-226.

34. Christine Busta, *Lampe und Delphin. Gedichte* (Salzburg: Müller, 1955), p. 11.

35. First published in 1949, this poem reflects on love after the Shoa. It proffers a catalogue of commandments against the oppressiveness of exile. Cf. John Felstiner, *Paul Celan. Eine Biographie* (Beckscher Reihe, 1379; München: C.H. Beck, 2000), p. 90.

36. Celan dedicated this poem to Ingeborg Bachmann.

> Du sollst zum Aug der Fremden sagen: Sei das Wasser.
> Du sollst, die du im Wasser weißt, im Aug der Fremden suchen.
> Du sollst sie rufen aus dem Wasser: Ruth! Noëmi! Mirjam![37]
>
> [You shall say to the eye of the (woman) stranger: Be the water.
> You shall seek in the stranger's eye those you know (are) in the water.
> You shall summon them from the water: Ruth! Naomi! Miriam!]

In this poem, Ruth belongs to a group of women: Ruth, Naomi and Miriam. They are introduced as former lovers and they recall the experience of death.[38] Furthermore, these biblical figures share a similar fate: they experienced exile and life-threatening hardship and they are searching for a home. Thus these women offer a mirror for the experience of the poem's world with its feeling of bereavement and homelessness, but their stories also bear witness to hope.

The poem interweaves the woman stranger and the biblical women. The memory of the lost women becomes beautiful through the woman stranger, and conversely the woman stranger is adorned by the sorrow for Ruth, Miriam and Naomi.

> Du sollst sie schmücken, wenn du bei der Fremden liegst.
> Du sollst sie schmücken mit dem Wolkenhaar der Fremden.
> [...]
> Du sollst die Fremde neben dir am schönsten schmücken.
> Du sollst sie schmücken mit dem Schmerz um Ruth, um Mirjam und Noëmi.
>
> [You shall adorn them when you lie with the (woman) stranger.
> You shall adorn them with the (woman) stranger's cloud-hair.
> [...]
> You shall most beautifully adorn the (woman) stranger by your side.
> You shall adorn her with sorrow for Ruth, for Miriam and Naomi.]

On the one hand, the imperatives of the poem ask for a remembrance of the biblical women and for an honouring of the past, while on the other hand, they also demand to embark on the present and the woman stranger. Thus the poem summons the addressee to continue, to remember what is lost, to vitalize forgotten grief and to be alive.[39]

37. Paul Celan, *Gesammelte Werke*, I (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 46. The poem was first published in the journal *Die Wandlung* (1949) and was later included in the cycle of poems *Mohn und Gedächtnis* published in 1952.

38. Cf. Birgit Hartberger, *Das biblische Ruth-Motiv in deutschen lyrischen Gedichten des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Münsteraner theologische Abhandlungen, 17; Altenberge: Oros-Verlag, 1992), p. 197.

39. 'Wenn das vergessene Leid soweit aktiviert wird, dass der Boden von Tod glüht, gelingt nach Celan die Verwandlung des Todes zum Leben. In paradoxer Verschränkung wird der Tod zur eigentlichen Möglichkeit des Daseins erhoben' (Hartberger, *Ruth-Motiv*, p. 199).

When Nelly Sachs refers to Ruth in the poem 'Land of Israel'[40] she introduces her more explicitly as a figure of hope. The poem starts with Israel's election as 'erwählte Sternstätte für den himmlischen Kuss' ('chosen starry place for the heavenly kiss') and then in the forth stanza pictures its people coming home after the Shoa. Remembering the biblical promises they return to the land Israel. Yet the future the poem envisions is not glorious:

> Land Israel,
> nun wo dein Volk
> aus den Weltenecken verweint heimkommt
> um die Psalmen Davids neu zu schreiben in deinen Sand
> und das Feierabendwort Vollbracht
> am Abend seiner Ernte singt...[41]
>
> [Land of Israel,
> now that your people
> return from the corners of the earth, tearstained
> to write anew David's psalms in your sand
> and the word of closing time 'Accomplished'
> on the evening of their harvest they sing...]

They return to write the sorrow and lament of the psalms into the vagrant sand, but despite the sign of transience a harvest and completion will be possible again. The promised land is a memory, but simultaneously it still represents hope for a future.

This situation is further reflected in the figure of Ruth. She is the symbol of hope,[42] the sign that life seems possible and even more that this life is again appealing.

> steht vielleicht schon eine neue Ruth
> in Armut ihre Lese haltend
> am Scheidewege ihrer Wanderschaft.
>
> [there may already stand a new Ruth
> gleaning in poverty
> at the crossroad of her wanderings.]

The new Ruth recognizes the awakening and trusts this promise. However, this Ruth has only reached the parting of her ways, and it can not yet be known whether she has chosen the way of life.

40. The poem was first published in 1949 in the volume of poems *Sternenverdunkelung*. The text is quoted from Nelly Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose. Gedichte* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1988), pp. 126-27.

41. Sachs, *Fahrt ins Staublose*, pp. 126-27.

42. Hartenberger, *Ruth-Motiv*, p. 261.

Yet another image of Ruth is introduced by Rose Ausländer in the poem 'Der Flügelteppich' ('The Flying Carpet').[43] The central motive of the 'Flügelteppich' alludes to an image drawn from the magic worlds of childhood with its fairy tales.[44] It belongs to a time when life still holds all its possibilities. The magic carpet thus is a metaphor for life in its abundance, with all its potential. The poem depicts the carpet as a present from the 'master weaver', new and unspent in the beginning, but now torn by heavy boots and bitten by moths; the flying carpet has lost its splendour and its magic.[45]

> Ich habe Fäden aufgelesen
> wie Ruth am Rand
> verwebe winzige Stücke
> in die geschwächten Schwingen.[46]
>
> [I picked up yarns
> like Ruth on the margin
> weave tiny pieces
> in the weakened wing.]

Grounded, forced to stay in a threadbare reality, the lyrical speaker tries to gather the threads and to repair the carpet. When this action is compared to Ruth her story enters the poem, although the references appear as a fleeting allusion. Like the biblical Ruth, the lyrical speaker is confronted with the task of making a new start out of the torn remnants of her former life and a few leftovers she finds. The comparison between the lyrical speaker and Ruth focuses on the desperate situation and emphasizes her persistence. Ruth and her assiduous initiative towards a seemingly unobtainable renewal of secure living conditions introduces the aspect of confidence that her struggle is not in vain. The hope to survive until the master weaver offers help further connects the lyrical speaker of the poem with Ruth:

> bis aus deiner Hand
> der Regenbogen rollt
> ins Muster Sterne sprühn.
>
> [until from your hand
> the rainbow rolls
> stars spray into the pattern.]

43. This poem was first published in 1965, but a previous version is dated 1942. Cf. Hartberger, *Ruth-Motiv*, p. 152.

44. Cf. Hartberger, *Ruth-Motiv*, p. 153.

45. The world of the poem bears obvious reminiscences of the National-Socialist regime.

46. Rose Ausländer, *Ich höre das Herz des Oleanders. Gedichte 1977–1979* (ed. Helmut Braun; Gesammelte Werke, 5; Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1984), p. 313.

Ruth's desire to be offered a new beginning is reflected in the allusion to the rainbow (Gen. 9.16).

The figure of Ruth offers the possibility of interpreting the situation and of justifying the forlorn attempts to improve the situation. Her memory is constructed as a memory against despair.

Reading and Writing from the Margins

The life Ruth gathers and creates from remnants of other people's harvest is also used as a metaphor for the poet himself/herself. Reading and writing is reflected as an act of gleaning, it is a diligent task that needs initiative as well as creativity in order to sustain and to create new perspectives. Ruth appears as the stranger, who does not take part in a common, superficial way of life but is looking for a new, sustainable vision at the margins of society.

In a later poem entitled 'Ruth'[47] Rose Ausländer refers to the biblical figure of Ruth in a reflection on communication. Ruth's harvest is again a way to guarantee survival, in this poem, however, on a poetological level. It is her task to find durable words in the vast amount of talking, words that are still whole and not blown away. In metaphorical speech the poem shows the harvest as conversations of chaff and grain that fills his chambers:

> Gespräche
> aus Spreu
> Korn füllt seine Kammern
> mit Mehl.
>
> [Talks
> (made) of chaff.
> Corn fills its chambers
> with flour.]

While the human activity has an ephemeral character, the personification of the grain puts the focus on the result, the full chambers of flour. Only when this main activity is completed, Ruth appears:

> Wenn die Gespräche
> verstummen
> Wind die Spreu entführt
> liest Ruth Ähren auf
> mit klugen Fingern.
>
> [When the talking
> hushes

47. This poem was first published in the volume of poems entitled *Mutterland* (1978). The text is quoted from the collected works: Ausländer, *Ich höre das Herz des Oleanders*,

> wind carries off the chaff
> Ruth picks ears
> with wise fingers.]

The poem focuses on Ruth as the other, the one who is set apart and who has no share in the seemingly effortless success, who does not participate in the fleeting conversations. Further, Ruth is the only one who is portrayed as actually harvesting as she picks up the ears of grain. It is not her words but her fingers that are called prudent as she carefully picks up ears of grain. Her gleaning aims at the full corn, the chaff still combined with the grain. Figuratively, she still finds words that are not fleeting, and carefully collects them. This is her part in creating a new life.[48] The poem itself seems to consist of such carefully picked words, which are sparsely used, just enough to be intelligible. But each word allows the reader to trace its range of meanings.

With the metaphorical fusion of reading and gleaning, Eva Zeller introduces the book of Ruth in her poem 'Das Rascheln der Seiten'.[49] It refers to the reader as someone who enters the biblical book like a field of grain.

> Das Rascheln der
> Seiten und Halme
> mein Atem
> blättert sie um.
>
> [The rustling of the
> pages and stalks
> my breath
> turns them.]

In a second stanza the field is identified with the book of Ruth, and the lyrical speaker slips into the role of Ruth as he/she is reading. But like the story of Ruth it is not a full harvest, but gleanings from a fictive world behind unnamed reapers:

> Aus dem
> Buch Ruth
> lese ich
> die Ähren auf
>
> immer hinter den
> Schnittern her
> das Feld grenzt
> an Wunder.

48. Ausländer often uses the word as a symbol for life, as an element that not only bears significance but even more is a creative act. Cf. Hartberger, *Ruth-Motiv*, p. 165.

49. Published in 1992 in the volume of poems *Ein Stein aus Davids Hirtentasche*, p. 19.

[From the
Book of Ruth
I glean
the ears

always following
the reapers
the field borders
on wonder.]

With the persistent interaction of gleaning and reading the poem points to a perspective outside any official interpretation and suggests the possibility of a reading from the margins. The hopes and expectations linked with the gleaning are not explicitly expressed. But the description of the field as lying adjacent to the miraculous raises expectations for wonderful things to come.

The poets, like Ruth, know about the magic and the elusiveness of words and life. Cautiously they pick ears of grain with the wisdom of hindsight, longing for the whole potential of the grain and the field.

Summary

The lyric reconstruction of Ruth in German poetry of the 20th century shows that the poets have focused on the ambition and the vision of this biblical figure. Consequently, the image modern lyric texts create often is a cursory glance or a snapshot in time. The poems bear witness to a desire that goes beyond easily satisfiable needs. References to Ruth work in two ways: on the one hand Ruth is used as a symbol for such a desire and on the other hand the references to the biblical figure also rouse a memory of Ruth as a role model who carried out her vision. Thus in the figure of Ruth the longing is grounded in the past and it receives its fortitude and its confidence from memory. When the visions of (a new) life are constructed with reference to Ruth, the promises of the past are interlinked with her story. In this way old promises and contemporary desire are allowed to draw near throughout the 20th century.

If the story of Ruth is encountered as a story of fulfilment, however, it is problematized and its happy end is critically reflected. These poems too point out that Ruth is more than an idyllic story, more than lovingly declared solidarity and submission and more than apparent success.

The figure of Ruth instead offers the possibility of reconstructing the immediate past and present through the eyes of the other. From her external perspective it becomes obvious that her desire is not primarily directed towards a participation in everyday life; rather, it longs for life as a whole embedded in a remembered world of promises.

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The Empathetic Pillar of Salt: Bible, Literature and Scholar in Conversation

Lina Sjöberg

Abstract

In this article I show how the mainstream interpretation of Genesis 18.16–19.29, where the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah as well as the fate of Lot's wife is conceived in terms of punishment, needs to be corrected. I propose that Lot's wife's transformation into a pillar of salt is a textual representation of depression that might be understood as a text-inherent critique of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. I also show how literature can serve as a hermeneutic tool for the biblical scholar, contributing to the interpretation of biblical texts that have traditionally posed stumbling blocks to interpretation. An intertextual journey between the Bible and literature is one among many ways to attain new knowledge, a way that is especially helpful in the area of the emotions, human relationships, and psychology as depicted in biblical Hebrew narratives.

Genesis 19.26, where Lot's wife turns around and is turned into a pillar of salt, is surrounded by gaps. The Hebrew text provides no answers to questions of why she looks back or the significance of the salt pillar. Yet, in the history of reception of this verse, the most common gap-filling explains the transformation as a punishment for disobedience or greed.[1] Genesis

1. See, for example, the words ascribed to Jesus in Lk. 17.31-33 or Genesis Rabbah, where Lot's wife is punished by becoming salt for sinning through salt (Jacob Neusner, *Genesis Rabbah: The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. II. Tarashiyyot Thirty-four through Sixty-seven on Genesis 8:15 to 28:9* [Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1985], pp. 215, 226). Likewise, with some variation, in Rashi's commentary on *Genesis Rabbah* (Rashi, *Commentary on the Torah. I. Bereshis/Genesis* [Artscroll Series; The Saperstein Edition; New York: Mesorah Publications, 1995], p. 206). See also the elaborate interpretation of Anne de Vries in *The Children's Bible*, where the wife is said to think about all the belongings she has left in Sodom and is labeled as 'disobedient' (Anne de Vries, *Barnens bibel* [trans. Britt G. Hallqvist; Örebro: International Publishing Company, 1967], pp. 28-29).

Many biblical scholars do not comment on Gen. 19.26 beyond presenting a general assessment of the verse as an etiology, but those who do tend to follow the mainstream

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